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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an assessment program utilized by the Center for Excellence in Oral Communication at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, that focuses on the assessment of communication competency in the interpersonal communication course. First, the paper provides a rationale for the course. Next, the paper describes the interpersonal course including course structure, objectives, and evaluative criteria based on a four-component model of competency (cognition, behaviors, affect, and ethics). The paper states that participants in the pilot assessment program were 235 undergraduate students enrolled in five sections of interpersonal communication. The paper next describes the course's assessment procedures for laboratory-based pre- and post-assessment interviews, and presents and discusses results of preliminary pre-post statistical analyses of data. The paper concludes with a discussion of future directions for assessment in the course. Three tables of data are included. (Contains 18 references.) (Author/RS)

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Assessing Communication Competency in the Interpersonal Communication Course: A Laboratory-Supported Approach

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Abstract

Assessing Communication Competency in the Interpersonal Communication Course: A Laboratory-Supported Approach

Considering the emergent role of assessment in academic institutions, it is imperative that effective assessment procedures be developed for all communication contexts. Some contexts, such as public speaking, have well-established assessment procedures, programs, and standardized and tested instrumentation. Other contexts, however, are in need of additional attention by communication scholars. This paper describes an assessment program utilized by the Center for Excellence in Oral Communication at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, that focuses on the assessment of communication competency in the interpersonal communication course. First, rationale for the course is provided. Next, the interpersonal course is described including course structure, objectives, and evaluative criteria based on a four-component model of competency (cognition, behaviors, affect, and ethics). Then the course's assessment procedures for laboratory-based pre- and post-assessment interviews are described, and the results of preliminary pre-post statistical analyses of data are presented and discussed. The paper concludes with a discussion of future directions for assessment in this course.

Assessing Communication Competency in the Interpersonal Communication Course: A Laboratory-Supported Approach

Recent national conferences and scholarly writings have called attention to and endeavored to clarify the paradigm now identified as oral communication competency (Backlund, 1990; Pearson & Daniels, 1988; Rubin, 1990). Foci on oral competency by communication scholars have been primarily on methods, models, and instruments for assessment (Crocker-Lakness, 1992; Hay, 1992; Morreale & Backlund, in press; Spitzberg, 1993; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). Considering these two trends, a need exists to apply the communication competency construct to specific courses taught within the communication discipline.

The purpose of this paper is threefold: (a) to describe a model for developing an undergraduate course in interpersonal communication that is grounded in a communication competency paradigm, (b) to describe a method for assessment of the impact of that model, and (c) to report the preliminary results of the assessment process. First, rationale for the course is provided. Next, the interpersonal course is described including course structure, objectives, and evaluative criteria based on a four-component model of competency (cognition, behaviors, affect, and ethics). Then, the course's assessment procedures for laboratory-based pre- and post-assessment interviews are described, and the results of preliminary pre-post statistical analyses of data are presented and discussed. The paper concludes with a discussion of future directions for assessment in this course.

Rationale

Rationale for a communication competency approach to the interpersonal course can be provided. Empirically, research has consistently related oral competency and communication training and development to academic and professional success (Curtis, Winsor, & Stephens, 1989; Rubin & Graham, 1988; Rubin, Graham, & Mignerey, 1990; Vangelisti & Daly, 1989). Theoretically, Vygotsky (1986) suggests that educated people must be orally competent, not simply because oral competency is necessary for success in life, but because improved oral competency develops intellectual and reasoning abilities. Therefore, an introductory undergraduate-level interpersonal communication course can facilitate the student's personal success and his or her development of the ability to communicate organized thoughts using spoken language.

To accomplish such goals, both the content and structure of the interpersonal communication course (COMM 102) at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, are based on a comprehensive model of oral competency articulated within the discipline (Littlejohn & Jabusch, 1982; Shockley-Zalabak, 1992; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). In addition, more individualized instruction and personalized relationships with students are made possible utilizing the support of graduate teaching assistants in an individualized assistance laboratory setting (Seiler & Fuss-Reineck, 1986).

Course Description and Requirements

The primary goal of COMM 102 is to develop the interpersonal communication competence of undergraduate students. A review of

the literature on communication competency suggests that a composite model of competence should include and focus on four dimensions or domains: cognitive, behavioral, affective, and ethical. In terms of content and performance, COMM 102 is carefully designed to facilitate students' achievement in each of the identified domains. Specific course objectives and criteria for assessment in each domain are articulated for students in the course syllabus.

Cognitive domain

> The student will be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the theories and concepts related to interpersonal communication. Those theories and concepts will subsume: understanding of the elements and components of the communication process; a basic understanding of interpersonal communication skills; and increased understanding and awareness of factors that affect the communication process. (Hackman & Morreale, 1992)

The cognitive dimension/domain subsumes knowledge and understanding of the communication process and the elements involved in a communication event. Attendance at and participation in all lectures is expected for students to gain competence in this domain. Students demonstrate their knowledge and understanding through three in-class objective exams.

Behavioral domain

> The student will work to gain greater control over interpersonal behaviors by identifying two communication skills related to the interpersonal process which he or she will seek to improve. (Hackman & Morreale, 1992)

The behavioral dimension/domain includes both abilities possessed by the communicator and skills or behaviors emitted or observed. Students demonstrate improved interpersonal

communication skills through participation in in-class experiential learning activities and involvement in two workshops scheduled during regular class time. Workshop topics include assertiveness, communication apprehension, conflict management, interviewing, listening, and team building.

Affective domain

> The student will become sensitive to how he or she perceives and is perceived by others. (Hackman & Morreale, 1992)

The affective dimension/domain encompasses the communicator's feelings, attitudes, motivation, and willingness to communicate. Students are expected to demonstrate improvement in their willingness and motivation to communicate interpersonally. To facilitate accomplishment in this domain, the course design includes an entrance and an exit interview for each student. The entrance interview, scheduled during the first three weeks of the semester, is conducted by a graduate teaching assistant and consists of setting personal goals for the course and assessment of the student's willingness to communicate. Based on assessment and discussion in the entrance interview, the student selects workshops that he or she will attend. The exit interview, scheduled during the final three weeks of the semester, consists of reviewing personal course goals, reassessing the student's willingness to communicate, and discussing final paper requirements.

Ethical domain

> The student will be able to demonstrate a defined set of ethics and values in regard to interpersonal communication. That set of ethics and values will indicate the student's ability to take responsibility for

> self, others, and relationships in interpersonal interactions. (Hackman & Morreale, 1992)

The ethical dimension/domain subsumes the communicator's ability and willingness to take moral responsibility for the outcome of the communication event. Students demonstrate the development of a set of interpersonal communication ethics and values by writing their own "Interpersonal Ethics Statement." A demonstration of knowledge of the course material on this topic and application of that material to him/herself are important.

Integration of all four domains

> The student will be able to demonstrate the integration of all four domains of competency. (Hackman & Morreale, 1992)

Students demonstrate the integration of the four domains by writing a five- to seven-page final paper--"Interpersonal Assessment." Excellent papers integrate material from class lectures and exercises, experiences in the laboratory, and selected workshops to describe how goals were set and progress achieved in their interpersonal communication. Additionally, the paper answers the questions: (a) What new goals will I establish as a result of information obtained and experiences gained during interpersonal communication, and (b) How do I intend to make progress toward the newly-established goals?

Class Structure

Structurally, the course utilizes a lecture/laboratory instructional model. The support of the laboratory staff and multimedia materials supplement the traditional classroom approach to instruction. In addition to attending weekly lectures

(cognitive and behavioral domains), all students enrolled in the 102 course have access to and are required to utilize the communication laboratory to satisfy certain course requirements (affective domain).

Method of Assessment

Participants

Participants in the pilot assessment program were 235 undergraduate students enrolled in five sections of interpersonal communication during one semester. Of that number, 92 were male and 143 were female; 197 were Anglo and 38 were non-Anglo. One hundred and two participants were first-year students; 69 were second-year students; 34 were third-year students; 11 were fourth-year students; and 19 were unclassified students. Twenty-seven participants were communication majors, and 208 were non-communication majors.

Data Collection

As described in the Course Description and Requirements, assessment of competence in COMM 102 was completed in the communication laboratory during entrance and exit interviews conducted by graduate teaching assistants. The interviews were held during the first and final three weeks of the semester. To assure confidentiality and encourage honesty in completing the assessment tool, students were informed that the classroom instructors would not have access to student scores, nor would the scores affect their grade in any way.

Measurement

Students' willingness to communicate was assessed via McCroskey and Richmond's (1987) Willingness to Communicate scale (WTC), an instrument designed to measure an individual's predisposition toward approaching or avoiding the initiation of communication. The WTC is a 20-item probability estimate scale made up of 12 items which comprise the measure and 8 items which are fillers. The 12 items on the scale assess an individual's wi'lingness to communicate in four contexts (public speaking, meeting, group, and dyad) and with three types of receivers (stranger, acquaintance, and friend). In the current study, alpha reliabilities were .92 for the pre-test and .95 for the post-test.

Date Analyses

The data were analyzed using t-tests to determine whether significant differences existed in WTC scores from pre- to post-assessment. T-tests were performed using the overall WTC scores as well as sub-scores in each of the four contexts (public speaking, meeting, group, and dyad) and with the three types of receivers (stranger, acquaintance, and friend). Data were analyzed for the total population as well as by gender and ethnicity.

Preliminary Results of Assessment

Tables 1 and 2 present the results of pre- and post-testing on the WTC scale. Table 1 indicates that the total population achieved highly significant gains ($p < .001$) in willingness to communicate in each of the four contexts and with each of the three types of receivers.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 About Here

Table 2 compares pre- and post-scores by gender. Again, both males and females significantly increased their willingness to communicate in each context and with strangers and acquaintances. In communication with friends, however, females made significant gains, while males did not.

Table 3 compares the scores of males and females at pre- and post-testing times. Results indicate that females were more

Insert Table 3 About Here

willing to communicate than males in the group context at both pre- and post-testing times ($p < .05$). In addition, in the context of interpersonal conversation, females were more willing to communicate than males at the time of post-testing ($p < .05$). Further, in the context of interpersonal conversation, the difference between males and females at pre-testing was near significance, with females indicating more willingness to communicate than males ($p = .055$). In other contexts and with other types of rece vers, however, no significant differences were noted.

In regard to ethnicity, t-tests indicated that no significant difference existed between gains made by Anglos and gains made by non-Anglos.

Discussion of Results

Preliminary results suggest that utilization of a laboratory-supported approach to the teaching of interpersonal communication may increase significantly self-perceived willingness to communicate with others. Although some increase in willingness to communicate may be expected as a result of the college experience, in general, findings indicate that when the regular classroom experience is supplemented with and supported by laboratory involvement in the form of (a) guidance in goal-setting based on pre-assessment of willingness to communicate, (b) workshops designed to aid in the achievement of goals, and (c) report-back sessions to verbally express progress on goals, then significant positive gains in willingness to communicate may occur.

The finding that females were more willing than males to communicate in groups and interpersonal conversations at both pre- and post-testing times was unexpected. If this trend continues to surface as the sample size grows larger, further investigation to identify the causes and possible intervention strategies may be warranted.

Conclusion

Future directions for the interpersonal communication course include refining course content and modifying assessment procedures and testing instruments as appropriate.

Faculty will review any differences between pre- and post-scores on the instrument administered during the first semester and redirect course content and pedagogy accordingly. Using the data

generated by the Willingness to Communicate scale, faculty will determine if greater emphasis should be placed on any of the four contexts assessed (public, meeting, group, dyad) or three types of receivers assessed (stranger, acquaintance, friend). Such greater emphasis and attention may include an increase in lecture materials (cognitive learning), workshop foci (behavioral learning), or laboratory experiences (affective learning). Additionally, assessment data will be further scrutinized for variability in course impact based on gender and ethnicity. If the assessment process indicates that any cultural subset of the sample (gender, ethnicity) is demonstrating less significant improvement in any assessed area/s, then faculty will develop plans to address the problematic area/s.

Finally, faculty will evaluate the entire assessment program as it relates to the interpersonal course at the end of the first two academic years. That evaluation will determine if the selected instruments and assessment program are: (a) assessing appropriately that which the course is intended to impact, (b) yielding valuable data for advising undergraduates in the pre- and post-interviews, or (c) in need of modification in some way to better serve the course and its assessment goals.

Table 1:
T-Tests Comparing Pre- and Post-Scores of Total Population of Spring 1993 COMM 102 Students on Willingness to Communicate (WTC).

Subset Category	N	Mean	Std Dev	t Value	2-Tail Prob
Group Discussion	187			-5.87***	.000
Pre		75.54	16.88		
Post		81.93	15.26		
Meetings	187			-7.98***	.000
Pre		65.58	20.23		
Post		74.84	18.34		
Interpers. Conversation	187			-5.93***	.000
Pre		75.56	16.32		
Post		81.77	13.93		
Public Speaking	187			-8.43***	.000
Pre		62.15	23.22		
Post		72.50	21.40		
Stranger	187			-8.00***	.000
Pre		49.90	25.62		
Post		62.01	23.05		
Acquaintance	187			-5.79***	.000
Pre		74.96	19.41		
Post		81.53	17.41		
Friend	187			-3.02***	.000
Pre		87.87	13.19		
Post		90.36	11.15		
Total WTC	187			-7.94***	.000
Pre		70.37	16.58		
Post		77.71	15.65		

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

Note: Increases in scores on the WTC are positive and show improvement.

Table 2:
T-Tests, by GENDER, Comparing Pre- and Post-Scores of Spring 1993 COMM 102 Students on Willingness to Communicate (WTC).

Subset Category	N	Mean	Std Dev	t Value	2-Tail Prob
Group Discussion					
Female	120			-5.00***	.000
Pre		77.55	17.16		
Post		83.74	14.16		
Male	67			-3.22**	.002
Pre		71.93	15.85		
Post		78.64	16.66		
Meetings					
Female	120			-7.06***	.000
Pre		66.42	21.12		
Post		76.32	18.26		
Male	67			-3.95***	.000
Pre		64.06	18.60		
Post		72.16	18.33		
Interpers. Conversation					
Female	120			-4.09***	.000
Pre		77.74	16.12		
Post		83.19	13.48		
Male	67			-3.30**	.002
Pre		71.62	16.03		
Post		79.19	14.44		
Public Speaking					
Female	120			-4.23***	.000
Pre		62.35	23.31		
Post		72.40	22.45		
Male	67			-5.49***	.000
Pre		61.81	23.22		
Post		72.67	19.52		

Table 2 (continued):

Subset Category	N	Mean	Std Dev	t Value	2-Tail Prob
Stranger					
Female	120			-7.65***	.000
Pre		51.98	26.31		
Post		64.40	22.35		
Male	67			-3.70***	.000
Pre		46.06	24.00		
Post		57.60	23.83		
Acquaintance					
Female	120			-4.07***	.000
Pre		75.36	20.38		
Post		81.45	17.18		
Male	67			-3.50**	.001
Pre		74.22	17.59		
Post		81.66	17.94		
Friend					
Female	120			-3.14***	.000
Pre		88.39	12.42		
Post		91.28	10.40		
Male	67			-1.08	.284
Pre		86.96	14.48		
Post		88.67	12.30		
Total WTC					
Female	120			-7.10***	.000
Pre		71.62	16.83		
Post		78.90	15.48		
Male	67			-4.08***	.000
Pre		68.12	16.00		
Post		75.58	15.86		

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

Note: Increases in scores on the WTC are positive and show improvement.

Table 3:
T-Tests Comparing Male and Female Scores of Spring 1993 COMM 102 Students on Willingness to Communicate (WTC) at Pre- and Post-Testing.

Subset Category	N	Mean	Std Dev	t Value	2-Tail Prob
Group Discussion					
Pre				1.99*	.048
Female	137	76.90	16.85		
Male	90	72.57	15.55		
Post				2.17*	.032
Female	116	84.05	13.89		
Male	65	78.71	16.89		
Meetings					
Pre				.59	.555
Female	137	65.98	18.41		
Male	90	64.40	18.63		
Post				1.40	.164
Female	116	76.24	18.60		
Male	65	72.22	18.33		
Interpers. Conversation					
Pre				1.93	.055
Female	137	76.85	16.48		
Male	90	72.47	16.97		
Post				2.03*	.045
Female	116	83.27	13.31		
Male	65	78.83	14.56		
Public Speaking					
Pre				-.49	.626
Female	137	61.38	24.29		
Male	90	62.96	23.34		
Post				-.31	.758
Female	116	72.23	22.56		
Male	65	73.23	19.82		

Table 3 (continued):

Subset Category	N	Mean	Std Dev	t Value	2-Tail Prob
Stranger					
Pre				1.29	.199
Female	137	50.53	26.28		
Male	90	46.13	24.05		
Post				1.66	.099
Female	116	63.72	23.03		
Male	65	57.63	23.82		
Acquaintance					
Pre				.25	.804
Female	137	75.05	20.52		
Male	90	74.38	19.55		
Post				.00	.999
Female	116	81.69	16.99		
Male	65	81.69	18.25		
Friend					
Pre				.41	.684
Female	137	88.03	13.13		
Male	90	87.26	14.55		
Post				1.38	.172
Female	116	91.30	10.40		
Male	65	88.78	12.53		
Total WTC					
Pre				.97	.331
Female	137	70.80	17.13		
Male	90	68.56	16.93		
Post				1.33	.186
Female	116	78.93	15.40		
Male	65	75.66	16.13		

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

Note: Increases in scores on the WTC are positive and show improvement.

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